

Writing a Great Research Paper: **Writing Your First Draft** *Study Guide*

by
Karl Weber, M.A.



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Writing a Great Research Paper: Writing Your First Draft

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item #VAI-1973 · price \$49.95

isbn 1-57385-197-3 · upc 600459197391

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P.O. Box 332

Roslyn Heights, NY 11577-0332

Writing a Great Research Paper: Writing Your First Draft Study Guide

Introduction

In this unique program, an expert writer teaches you how to assemble an effective outline for your research paper and capture your best ideas in a first-rate first draft—one that will make the revision process much easier and put you well on your way to a higher grade! Plus, you'll learn how to treat "blinking cursor syndrome" with proven strategies for conquering writer's block.

For easier studying and maximum success, we recommend that you view the program over a number of short sessions: don't try to absorb too much at one time. Review the entire program, or specific sections, as many times as you find necessary in order to master the material.

Perhaps most importantly: Don't forget to take advantage of your "pause" button while viewing the program. Keep plenty of scrap paper handy so you can jot down ideas, work through concepts, and more. And finally, be sure to use the myriad on-screen graphics to take notes for yourself—when you're done, you'll have a notebook you can refer back to again and again.

About Your Instructor

Karl Weber, M.A., is an educator, editor, and bestselling author in fields ranging from business to politics to test preparation. He has worked on books with such noted figures as management guru Adrian Slywotzky, Loews Hotels CEO Jonathan M. Tisch, and President Jimmy Carter.

Part 1: Creating an Outline

Keep it simple: Don't stress about that stodgy, pedantic outline form you may have learned, with its Roman numerals, capital letters, Arabic numerals, lower case letters, etc. It's too easy to get hung up on what goes where and why. That form might work well for a final presentation version of your outline, but it can actually slow you down when you're sketching out the first version of your outline.

Start by writing your thesis at the top of your outline, stated in that single clear sentence.

Now ask yourself: What needs to be said to support the thesis? Think about the various parts of your thesis, breaking it apart into pieces as needed. Each part needs to be explained and defended, and sewn together into a convincing whole. You may need to:

- Define precisely and clearly the terms you use in the thesis.
- Give accounts of events and examples that suggest a cause-and-effect relationship.
- Quote statistics or other numerical data.
- Detail individual examples that suggest a broader pattern (sometimes anecdotes).
- Cite factual evidence to back up the truth of the various parts of your thesis, including, depending on the nature of the paper, either data from primary sources, ideas from secondary sources, or both.
- Give information about alternative theses, along with facts and ideas to show why you think these alternative theses are wrong.

Thumb through your note cards, and jot down on a piece of scrap paper a list of all of the various supporting ideas you have to choose from. Whenever you come across a strong piece of supporting information that helps to explain, defend, clarify, or sharpen your thesis, write a phrase or sentence that summarizes it on your scrap paper. Look over your list: Is it full enough? Are there any holes? Is it too full? Are there any redundancies?

Part 2: Classic Outline Structures

Now, how do you reorganize this list into a usable outline? Consider the following structures:

- Narrative sequence (you can reorganize your list chronologically as a timeline or storyboard or as a classic storytelling arc—exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, denouement)
- Cause and effect (you can reorganize your list as a two-column chart or table, with Causes and Effects in each column and a specific set of events in each row)
- Compare and contrast (you can reorganize your list as a two-column chart or table, with Similarities and Differences in each column and a specific set of elements in each row)
- Pro and con (you can reorganize your list as a two-column chart or table, with Advantages and Disadvantages in each column and a specific set of qualities in each row)
- Thesis and evidence (you can reorganize your list as a breakdown of your thesis, just presenting the evidence for it, point by point, in some sequence that feels clear and logical)

Once you've chosen a structure, use a few different colored pens or markers to apply some color-coding to your list. Mark all of the supporting ideas that belong to the same event, theme, example, argument, point, observation, etc. with the same color, creating an easy-to-distinguish chunk. Then, in the same color, write a quick phrase in the margin that identifies that chunk. You may have to play with this organization a few times, recopying your list as needed. Once you've finished defining your chunks, transfer them into your outline one at a time.

Some pointers for a good outline:

- Spill the beans.
- Eliminate the irrelevant.
- Start and finish strong.

Introductions and Conclusions

Traditionally, an introduction prepares your readers for what they're about to read: You focus on a specific research question and propose a thesis that answers that question, and then you defend it in the rest of your research paper. But, just as in a good novel, your first words also serve to capture your readers' attention and "sell" the rest of your writing (enough that they'll keep reading it!). To set your research paper apart, pull your readers in, and make a great first impression, you may want to begin with a "hook" (that's a music industry term for an intro that's original, impressive, and memorable). In addition to making sure that you include your **thesis statement** (in one form or another) within your introduction, consider:

- Did you find a short quote that succinctly encapsulates your thesis? Or perhaps even one that represents a widely-held alternative thesis? If so, consider beginning your introduction with that quotation.
- Did your research turn up an interesting anecdote? Perhaps you can retell that narrative.
- If you're using a narrative structure, consider starting with the moment right before the climax. (That's when the drama is likely to be highest, so it builds a sense of anticipation in your readers.)
- In your reading, did you locate any common misconceptions, little-known facts, or surprising paradoxes that relate to your thesis? You could use one of these as a way to begin your paper.
- Can you think of a situation or personality in current events that relates to your thesis? If so, you might consider creating an analogy in your introduction.
- You may even want to begin your paper by directly asking your research question. Then discuss the background information and answer the question with your thesis.

Whereas an introduction focuses the general down to the specific, the conclusion extends the specific up to the general. A well-written conclusion doesn't summarize your research point-by-point or paraphrase your introduction—it takes your thesis, which you've made a good case for in the rest of your research paper, and explores its broader implications and/or reflects on its larger significance. It leaves that all-important final impression on your readers and should give your paper a sense of thoroughness and authoritativeness. Assuming that you have effectively proven your thesis within the rest of your paper, consider:

- What's the "next step" for research in your topic? How would another student delve even further into this topic, using your paper as an inspiration?
- Do people make any wrong assumptions when they presume that a popular alternative thesis is true? If so, perhaps you could discuss what conclusions should be drawn instead.
- What would the implications be, hypothetically, if your thesis were false? Perhaps you could describe them and their significance.
- Can you think of a situation or personality in current events that relates to your thesis? If so, you might consider creating an analogy in your conclusion.
- Did you find a short quote that succinctly summarizes the implications of your thesis? If so, perhaps you could include that quotation within your conclusion.
- Some very effective research papers end with a simple probing question. Why shouldn't yours?

Part 3: Conquering Writer's Block

Some tips for beating "blinking cursor syndrome":

- Say it in a single sentence.
- Write down what you'd tell a friend.
- Just start writing.
- Play with blocks.
- Start with what you can write most easily.
- Don't be a perfectionist.
- Experiment with writing at different times and in different places.
- Give yourself plenty of time—write a page or two a day.